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Participatory Workshops for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and Training

Contents

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Abstract

This paper examines the potentials of participatory workshops in higher education and training. It originates in earlier experiences in South Asia, Africa and Europe with training and familiarisation workshops for PRA, and in more recent workshops to teach and learn about other topics. Participatory workshops need a minimum of perhaps 12 people and have been found feasible, and often better, with larger numbers in the range of 30-200 people. They can combine the economies of scale of lectures and the interactive learning of small seminars. Approaches, techniques and behaviours for large participatory workshops have evolved. Explanations of their apparent rarity in higher education and training include constraints which are physical - lack of suitable large rooms, organisational - problems of dovetailing curricula and timetables, and professional and personal – the traditional and embedded methods, mindsets, behaviours and habits of faculty. An agenda for action includes constructing more suitable room space, encouraging faculty to try participatory workshops, and learning more about what works best. Participatory workshops can be both serious and fun.

Participatory workshops in this paper refers to occasions involving substantial numbers of participants who learn not only from being taught, but also from combinations of their own analyses, interactions, experiences, reflections and sharing. Much of the argument is presented in more detail in Participatory Workshops: a sourcebook of 21 sets of ideas and activities (2002) (referred to below as PW).

Apologia[i]

It is only fair to the reader to state some of the limitations of where I am coming from and what this paper is based on[ii]. I am intimidated by and dislike giving lectures. This predisposes me to overvalue alternatives. In the past two decades, as an untrained amateur, I have stumbled into participatory workshops and enjoyed the alternative they present. In the 1980s this was with RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal) . In the 1990s it was with PRA/PLA (PRA=Participatory Rural Appraisal or Participatory Reflection and Action, and PLA=Participatory Learning and Action)[iii]. Most recently it has been with other applications, drawing on the earlier experiences. Many of the approaches and methods have been picked up from colleagues or evolved with them, mainly trainers and practitioners from NGOs in the South especially South Asia, from IIED (the International Institute for Environment and Development, London) and from the Participation Group at IDS (the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex). Many approaches and methods have been improvised interactively on the run and under pressure. This has been in a range of countries and cultural contexts and has been fun.

The PRA/PLA workshops in which I have been involved were intended in large part to provide experiential learning. Some were in the field, co-facilitated, over a period of 5-12 days, with the aim of enabling participants to start becoming PRA/PLA practitioners. Some have taken place mainly in a large room, often with myself as sole facilitator, over a period of 1-2 days, with the limited aim of a light taste and familiarisation, and with a increasing emphasis on behaviour and attitudes.

This has led on, over the past ten years or so, to increasing use of participatory workshops for other topics. I shall refer to these as topic PWs. This has been with groups of graduate students from countries of the North and South, and with Government, aid agency and NGO staff in various countries. To give a sense of scope, examples of topics covered have been:

- normal and new professionalism
- seasonal, gender and health dimensions of poverty
- changing ideas of development
- sustainable livelihoods
- power and relationships, attitudes and behaviour
- participatory analysis of participatory workshops themselves (which was a major learning for me).

In the course of doing this I have come to wonder why participatory workshops are not more widely used in higher education and training. I may exaggerate their potential. But I have come to see them as in several respects both feasible alternatives and better than what I perceive as much current teaching and learning practice.

The question posed in this paper is, then, whether participatory workshops present an opportunity for improving teaching and learning in higher education and in training institutions; and whether through them, participation itself can be experienced and learnt.

I am writing more in the first person than in the passive evasive. What follows is what I think now. It will change. At any point I may be either wrong or repeating what is well known to those who are professionals in education. These are ideas and practices I have come across almost by chance. I can only say that so far they *seem* to work, to be appreciated by participants, and to lead to learning.

Dominant modes of teaching and learning

As I understand and have known it, traditional university and college teaching tends to value high tutor:student ratios for where there are direct interactions between teachers and individual students, and low ratios in lectures where many students can be present. At one extreme in the UK, there is the Oxbridge tradition of the weekly one-to-one between student and tutor. While this has its strengths, not least in developing skills of mutual bluff, it looks extravagant in tutors' time. The Redbrick seminar where perhaps 5 to 15 students meet a tutor is more economical in tutors' time, but can easily intimidate

students, undermine their confidence, inhibit their participation, and lure and trap the faculty member into talking too much, even (as I have overheard, and found myself doing) virtually lecturing. For its part, the more formal lecture to large numbers is at its best an art form with elegant performance, but even when well done has the structure of top-down teaching: it has economies of scale but it normally lacks any sort of participatory learning. The seminar with small numbers at its best is something I do not think I have experienced, certainly not with any I have conducted.

The questions are whether, to what degree and how, topic PWs can combine the economies of scale of lectures, with its low tutor to student (or facilitator to participant) ratio, with good learning by students (or participants).

There is no question here of any sort of PW fundamentalism. A mixed repertoire for teaching and learning is surely best, not least because different people and different cultures have different mixes and balances of ways of learning, and variety of experience is stimulating. The question is, rather, whether participatory workshops could and should have a bigger place in teaching and learning in higher education and training institutes.

Participatory Workshops: Learning from the experience

In PWs I have found that:

- participants or students usually know more about the subject than I expect
- their capacity to undertake their own analysis is often more than I expect
- they can often do things I thought I had to do, and do them better. A common example is taking feedback from discussions
- when they "teach" each other it takes less time and is more intensive than when I talk. They listen to each other more than they listen to me
- the more they do, the easier it is for me to regroup, prepare for the next stage, and act strategically. In this respect, workshops can be less stressful than lecturing.
- their diagrams and other visualisations can express and present for analysis degrees of complexity which defy effective expression and analysis in words
- much of our learning is by experiencing and finding out for ourselves. Learning is then consolidated and expanded by talking. For shy people, or people working in other than their mother tongue, this can need a safe space which encourages them to talk.
- people remember stories, especially personal stories. I was startled last year in IDS in a participatory workshop about participatory workshops, to learn that what was most remembered was the stories I had told against myself.[iv] Informal feedback on the PW book suggests that the part people read and appreciate most is Part 3 Messing Up (PW 57-67).

Many practices are known for participatory workshops (see especially Pretty *et al* 1995 for an excellent collection and advice, and PW 196-209 for annotations of other accessible sourcebooks). Some of the issues and options in the PW book concern:

- Approaches, behaviours, attitudes and tips for facilitators (PW 3-16, 180-187)
- Getting started (PW 17-30)
- Energisers (PW 31-39)
- Evaluation and ending (PW 40-56)
- Learning from mistakes (PW 57-64)
- Groups and their formation (PW 71-82)
- Seating arrangements (PW 83-95)
- Games (PW 109-123)
- Ideas and options for analysis and feedback (PW 130-145)
- Ways to help each other learn (PW 146-158)

One aspect which the PW book treats inadequately (PW 4-6) is the preparations and consultations needed before a workshop, including participatory curriculum development (Taylor 2003).

Among the key practices I have learnt to try to use (though sometimes I forget or fail to), four stand out:

1. identify who already know about a subject or have relevant experience and find ways for them to share and compare their knowledge
2. avoid telling people what they can work out for themselves
3. hand over the stick or pen, that is, invite people to take over activities
4. set aside and assure time for participants' silent personal reflection and note taking at the end of sessions or of a day, and follow this with quiet small group sharing

All four of these practices decentre, that is, in a participatory mode they pass initiative and responsibility to others, inviting their contribution, and taking stress off the teacher or facilitator. They can all be applied with large numbers.

Participatory workshops with large numbers

Large numbers here means roughly in the range of 30 – 200 people. Participatory workshops with such numbers have proved more feasible and useful than might be expected. There are numerous tips for managing them (e.g. PW 96-106). They appear to be a win-win, achieving economies of scale and at the same time enhancing learning through participatory interactions. My experience so far is that:

- there is not much that cannot be learnt in a participatory workshop mode;
- this often seems better (more experiential, more internalised) than a lecture mode
- size is rarely a disadvantage if other conditions are right.
- behaviour and attitudes of the teacher/facilitator are critical

These assertions deserve to be tested more systematically.

strengths and techniques

Strengths depend on facilitation, for which there are many straightforward tips and techniques. Some tips are control-oriented as with facilitator-led clapping for silence (PW 100). Some approaches empower students or participants through handing over control of detail and process with minimum structure (handing over the stick) as with various forms of SOSOTEC (self-organising systems on the edge of chaos) (PW 93-4, 123-8). Learning in larger workshops is typically from sequences of varied and contrasting activities and experiences. These can include, for example, plenary presentations, buzzes (of two or three people), small groups, games, personal reflection, various forms of listing, sorting, analysis and sharing, diagramming, simultaneous small group role plays, and many forms of feedback.

Some of the resulting strengths are often:

- co-learning by participants through interacting, doing, experiencing, talking, diagramming, reflecting and sharing learning
- economies of scale, with large numbers managed by one facilitator or a few.
- "a certain freedom for participants: safe anonymity to shelter the shy, space to grumble for the disgruntled and cover to slip away for the bored" (PW 96). The safe place for those who are shy or unsure of their ideas or of language to express themselves may be especially important with international groups
- active engagement, with animation, noise, movement and often fun, for facilitators as well as participants
- mixing, meeting and diversity, when people from different courses come together. Feedback on this has been favourable. Much as people on courses may value their colleagues, they appreciate interacting with others. There are several simple ways of mixing the membership of small groups to ensure cross contacts (PW 71-82).

Weaknesses

Things can go wrong in participatory workshops. These can result from facilitation (see 21 Mistakes I Make in Workshops PW: 57-60), or from other vulnerabilities (see 21 horrors in participatory workshops PW:61-64). In brief written evaluations at the end of PWs, I have asked:

> What did you learn most from (or sometimes, find most useful)?
> What did you learn least from (or sometimes, find least useful)?
> How could a workshop like this be improved?

I have not kept a record. It must also be noted that not all participants respond, and some may have already left; and those who have left might have had other points and been more critical. With that caveat, the most common shortcomings noted in feedback back have been:

- *Cramped space*. This is sometimes expressed as "too many people". However, this point tends to be raised when we are cramped and not when there is plenty of space (as, for example, in a splendid large room in the new Agriculture building at Reading

University)[v]. There are several ways of managing space (PW 101-102), but I have often been forced to accept trade-offs between numbers and space, accepting more people while knowing that space will be a problem because the room is not big enough and will limit what we can do or how easily we can do it.

- *Noise and acoustics.* Acoustics in some large flat rooms can be bad. Fans, air conditioners, and traffic outside have all been problems. Lecture theatres have the edge here for audibility with numbers. A portable microphone is sometimes a solution.
- *Too little telling how to do things.* Over the years I have shifted from detailed instructions for activities to giving a bare minimum framework to allow for creativity. With PRA methods such as matrix scoring, some participants say that they would have liked to be told more how to do it. I am unrepentant.
- *Timing in the course.* Evaluations quite often say that the workshop (whatever the subject) should have come earlier in the course, including meeting students in other courses. I wonder whether there is a tendency for higher education and training courses to be more didactic at the beginning, setting the scene and establishing the intellectual framework, leaving any participatory activities for later stages. In October 2002 in the University of Sussex we attempted to meet this with a morning's joint workshop for six newly arrived courses in IDS and CDE. It is becoming more common, too, for the wish to be expressed that more of a course could be participatory.
- *Time management.* It is often difficult to finish "on time" with participatory activities (PW 60). Time for review and reflection tends to be squeezed.

Some of these weakness can be serious; but they can be tackled and overcome. In themselves they do not explain why participatory workshops with large numbers are not a more common part of higher education.

Obstacles and deterrents

Explanations may lie more in constraints and impediments which are physical, organisational, and personal and professional.

Physical. The most common physical constraints are unsuitable rooms (too small or auditoria or lecture theatres with tiers of fixed seats), participation-unfriendly furniture, and acoustics . Many universities and training institutes are trapped by the legacy of dead architects, academics and trainers with lecturing mindsets and habits. The mode of much teaching and learning is constrained by a dais and banked rows of seats. In such places participatory activities are not impossible, but their scope is limited. One option is the quick lateral buzz with neighbours. Another is odd rows rising and talking to those in the seats behind them (the effect can be electric the first time) (PW 87-8). But many other participatory activities are out of the question in such physical conditions.

Organisational. Organisational obstacles include: scheduling and curricula which make it difficult to bring courses together at the same time for a common theme; the longer

time taken by workshop learning compared with lectures; problems securing suitable rooms or other space for such periods; and the common requirement to finish "on time".

Professional and personal. Professional impediments are traditions of teaching and learning which do not recognise or value participatory workshops. The personal level is significant. For traditional teachers to become good facilitators may require a good deal of unlearning, and of changing mindsets, attitudes, behaviours (PW 7-9, Kumar 1996) and ways of being and of relating to participants and students. There may be issues of ego and power. Lecturers and teachers may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with more open-ended and participatory approaches, especially with larger numbers, and unwilling to take what they see as risks with situations which may be difficult to control and at which their colleagues may look askance. For some, all of this may amount to threatening experiential threshold to cross.

Combined, these forces are so strong that it is easy to understand why participatory workshops have not yet become widespread in higher education. A further speculative possibility is that to cover a subject in a topic PW may take more time than in a straight lecture.

All these points reinforce the case for learning more about topic PWs and their potentials.

Topic participatory workshops: how widely applicable?

Two arguments may be used to suggest that the scope for substituting topic PWs for lectures and small seminars is quite limited. It may be said first, that some subject matter can only be imparted through lectures, and second, that small group seminars are essential when one-to-one tutor student interactions are ruled out by numbers. There may be some strength in both these arguments. But I question the extent to which they apply.

First, to be sure, there will always be a place for a good lecture, and there are subjects which lend themselves to a lecture format, perhaps especially in the sciences. There is a lot to be said for a diversity of learning experiences, and lectures can be part of the repertoire. Powerpoint, for all its limitations, has opened up options of showing diagrams, and then handing them out in hard copy or electronically. I have been struck, however, by how relatively easy it is for factual information to be shared and discussed and learnt from in a PW mode (see for example PW 146-158). It would be good to be challenged now by some who feel lectures are the only way, and to work on their subject matter with them to see if there are more cost-effective alternatives. There are, for example, options in which pairs, threes or larger numbers of learners interact intensively over texts, diagrams or case studies (see e.g The teaching-learning wheel, and Merry-go-round PW 149-150).

Second, in participatory workshops there can be small groups without a tutor. But one or more tutors (facilitators) or other persons with relevant knowledge or experience can be on tap. A group with questions can call in a tutor, like a consultant, reversing the normal power relationship. Also, in small groups without tutors those who otherwise are nervous

and inhibited are more likely to speak. There are games and exercises (e.g. mapping interactions PW 177) feasible in large workshops which encourage self-awareness of behaviour, particularly among those who talk most, and which may help them to allow others to talk more.

Two other ways to get a sense of how widely and usefully participatory workshops can be applied deserve to be explored. One is reflection by participants about the experience of workshop participation and participatory learning, and how these might be improved. The other is faculty or facilitators themselves reflecting on how they facilitate and manage such workshops.

A Vision and Agenda

For teaching and learning participation, a vision for universities, colleges and training institutions can have two dimensions: one where participation is a subject which is taught, as already occurs in some training institutions and can be proposed with courses and degrees in participation[vi]; and a second and broader dimension where participatory learning is practised as part of the way faculty do what they do. For a vision of this second dimension in which topic PWs play their part we can imagine a scenario:

- Buildings have been converted, or new ones designed, to provide suitable large flat rooms with good acoustics and furniture for participatory workshops with large numbers.[vii]
- More and more faculty are comfortable to innovate and learn as facilitators with appropriate attitudes and behaviour.
- Ways of exploring and learning about many subjects in a participatory workshop mode have been devised and materials and methods developed and adopted. The repertoire of approaches, methods, exercises, behaviours and attitudes is richer and more varied than today, and has taken off into self-sustaining growth and improvement.
- The learning of students and participants is less book- and lecture- based and more experiential. Participatory workshops and associated peer and experiential teaching and learning are recognised as efficient, effective and fun, and straight lectures have become fewer, sometimes even a default mode of last resort.

To move in the direction of this vision, here is an agenda:

- *Space and architecture*. Convert existing university and college buildings and design new ones to provide more large flat rooms with plenty of wall space, and good acoustics. Equip them with participation-friendly furniture[viii]. Wherever lack of suitable space is a constraint, this is a priority.
- *Encouragement*. Encourage and legitimate participatory workshops as good means for teaching and learning topics. Participatory teaching and learning would then be pervasive as a way faculty do what thy do in higher education and training institutes, not just in special courses or parts of courses.

- *Participatory workshops for faculty*. Introduce participatory workshops by and for faculty, encouraging them to experiment with participatory workshop approaches and methods; and perhaps combine this with mutual encouragement, sharing experiences, networking and supporting one another. Teaching and Learning Units, where they exist and by whatever title, can play a role here (as some no doubt already do).
- *Sharing between courses and streams*. Encourage the directors of different courses to come together and combine for participatory learning workshops. This requires a conscious, non-territorial planning effort which might pay off in a somewhat lighter teaching-learning load
- *Research*. Learn more about the strengths, weaknesses, methods and potentials of participatory workshops, how they compare with other approaches to teaching and learning, and how they can be improved and spread

Coda

There are many reasons for exploring the potential of participatory workshops, not least economies of scale, and the scope for variety and quality of interactive and experiential learning. There is also what in Kerala[ix] they call the "enthusiasm of scale". Large numbers can generate a buzz, energy and enthusiasm, and give those who are shy safe space to talk. They can be serious fun, enjoying while learning and learning while enjoying. We need to learn more about them and how they can be done well; and that will be in their own spirit, of learning by doing.

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[i] I am grateful to all those who have contributed to the experiences on which this paper is based. The usual disclaimers apply.

[ii] A fuller statement can be found in Participatory Workshops: a sourcebook of 21 sets of ideas and activities, Earthscan 2002: xi-xvi

[iii] For RRA see Proceedings of the 1985 International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal, Rural Systems Research and Farming Systems Research Projects, University of Khon Kaen, Thailand. For PRA/PLA see www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip for many sources, and Shah, Kambou and Monahan 1999 Embracing Participation in Development: Wisdom from the field, for a discussion of PRA and PLA by Jim Rugh and a guide to methods by Meera Kaul Shah

[iv] The finding that people remember most stories told against yourself leads to the intriguing idea that it is important to make mistakes that will make good stories which incorporate the lessons you hope people will pick up. All the same, I am trying not to apply that to the writing of this paper.

[v] The big new room in the new building takes the place of a cramped room in a second World War prefab in which for year after year we struggled with space. The new room has transformed the whole feeling of such workshops.

[vi] As with the MA proposed and being planned at IDS at the University of Sussex to start in May 2004

[vii] The rooms themselves need careful design. The view taken by the architects of IDS, especially in room 120, that many windows are good, makes difficult the good workshop practice of recording the sequence of experience and outputs around the walls. This is also impeded by the practice of hanging, or worse, screwing, pictures or works of art on walls. Removing them can cause custodial distress (A batik in room 221 at IDS, when unscrewed, reveals a notice ROBERT PUT IT BACK AT ONCE.) In London, LSE, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine all appear severely constrained by lack of suitable rooms. Sometimes it is necessary to go outside a university to find a big enough space for a workshop with large numbers: at Cornell it was a golf club. Some universities with new buildings have done well. The walls also need to have firm plaster and paint which will not retain marks, flake off, or crumble when masking tape is applied.

[viii] Preferences for furniture differ. Some minima are light and stackable chairs, and tables which are robust, light, easy to move, and versatile in the ways they can be put together or on top of each other. It is still strangely rare to find both chairs and tables which meet these simple basic requirements.

[ix] Astonishing to relate, participatory workshops for democratic decentralisation in Kerala have had as many as 700 participants, combining plenaries with group work. A key to their success, reportedly, has been intense attention to logistics.